

Sūrah 76

Al-Dahr

(Time)

(Madīnan Period)

Title

This *Sūrah* has two titles – *al-Dahr* and *al-Insān* – and both these words occur in the opening verse of the *Sūrah*.

Period of Revelation

Most of the Qur'ānic scholars including 'Allāmah al-Zamakhsharī, Imām al-Rāzī, Qādī al-Bayḍāwī, 'Allāmah al-Nishāpūrī, Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Kathīr and many others regard it a Makkan *Sūrah*. 'Allāmah al-Ālūsī refers to this as the consensus view. However, some Qur'ānic commentators are of the opinion that the entire *Sūrah* was revealed in Madīnah. Some others think that it is indeed a Makkan *Sūrah*, but verses 8–10 were sent down in Madīnah.

As to its contents and stylistic features, it very much differs from Madīnan *Sūrahs*. On reflection, it appears that it is not only a Makkan *Sūrah*, but it was revealed during the early phase of the Makkan period, which began just after the revelation of the first

seven verses of *Sūrah al-Muddaththir*. Verses 8–10 of this *Sūrah* clearly appear to be its essential part. If they are read in their proper context, there is nothing to suggest that the verses preceding and following these had come down some 15–16 years earlier and the three verses (8–10) were revealed several years later and inserted into the *Sūrah*.

What has lent credence to taking it as a Madīnan *Sūrah* is the report by 'Aṭā' on Ibn 'Abbās's authority. According to this report, Ḥasan and Ḥusain once fell ill and the Prophet (peace be upon him) and a number of Companions called on their father, 'Alī. Some Companions suggested that 'Alī make a vow to Allah for their recovery. Accordingly, 'Alī, Fāṭimah, and their maid, Fiḍḍah vowed that if Allah cured Ḥasan and Ḥusain, they will fast for three days to show their gratitude. By God's grace they recovered and all three persons started observing fasts. 'Alī did not have any food in his house, so he borrowed three *ṣā'* of barley from somebody (one report says that he had earned this grain through manual labour). On the first day as they sat to break their fast, a needy person begged for food. They gave him all the food they had and went to bed after consuming only water. The next day exactly the same happened, when an orphan appeared and they gave all the food to him, keeping only water for themselves. On the third day, while they were about to break their fast, a prisoner asked for food and they gave him everything. On the fourth day, 'Alī called on the Prophet (peace be upon him) along with both of his sons. He noted their miserable condition on account of hunger. He accompanied them on their return home and saw Fāṭimah suffering from the pangs of hunger. Tears welled in his eyes. It was then that Gabriel visited him and gave him the glad tiding that Allah had felicitated him regarding his blessed family. Gabriel then recited the whole *Sūrah* to him. According to Ibn Mihrān, he recited only verses 5–31. However, Ibn 'Abbās's report, narrated by Ibn Marduwayh, specifies that only verse 8 was sent down in the context of 'Alī and Fāṭimah. It makes no reference to the above incident. This story appears in 'Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī's *Tafsīr al-Basīṭ* (4, 104), which was most probably used as the source by al-Zamakhsharī (*al-Kashshāf*, 6, 278–279), al-Rāzī (*al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 30, 244) and al-Nīshāpūrī.

The above story is extremely unreliable in terms of the chain of its narrators. Moreover, on scrutiny, it appears equally incredible. Had a single person begged for food, it was beyond reason that he was given the food of all five members of the family. Even after giving him food, the five family members could have shared the food of four. Equally unbelievable is the version that 'Alī and Fāṭimah, who possessed insights into matters of faith, preferred to starve their weak children who had just recovered from their illness, taking it as an act of virtue. Furthermore, to ask the prisoners to beg for food was never practised in Islamic history. Had the state imprisoned them, it provided for both their food and clothing. Had a prisoner been placed under someone's custody, that person was responsible for looking after his needs. It was unthinkable in Madīnah that a prisoner would have begged for food.

Even if one overlooks all these flaws in the report and accepts it as it is, it tells, at most, that when the Prophet's family members did this good act, Gabriel congratulated the Prophet (peace be upon him), informing him that Allah had approved their good deed, for they had done what is approvingly mentioned in this *Sūrah*. However, it does not necessarily mean that this *Sūrah* was revealed on that occasion. When it is said in a report that a particular verse was sent down with reference to a particular incident, it does not mean that the dates of both tally exactly. What the report signifies is that the verse applies exactly to the particular incident. Imām al-Sūyūṭī has cited Ibn Taymiyyah's opinion in his *al-Itqān*: "When the reporters say that a particular verse was occasioned by a certain incident, it may mean that the same incident occasioned its revelation, or it may mean that while the verse applies to the matter, it did not occasion its revelation." He has quoted (1, 90) also Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī's following stance which features in his *al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*: "It was customary on the part of the Companions and Successors to speak of a verse in connection with a particular matter, signifying that a particular command is related to that. This does not mean that a particular matter caused the revelation of that verse, only that a command is inferred from it." (*al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* I, p. 31. [1929 edition])

Subject Matter and Themes

The theme of this *Sūrah* is to apprise man of his true position in this world. It further instructs man that if he realises his position well and behaves with gratitude towards God, he will have an undisclosed happy end. If he takes to the path of disbelief, his end will be in an undisclosed terrible manner. This theme features in the larger *Sūrahs* of the Qur'ān too, in greater detail. However, in the early Makkan *Sūrahs*, the same truth is presented in a manner which is very short and brief but highly effective. Such brief and elegant sentences are easy to memorise and recite.

First, man is reminded that in his earliest stage he was not even worthy of mention. He was created out of a drop of an intermingled sperm. Even his mother was unaware at that stage of conception. No one then could say that this microscopic entity would grow one day into a human being, the supreme creature of God on earth. Next, man is warned that he has been created in the form and shape that he is, so that God might try and test him in this world. Accordingly, in contrast with other creatures, he is invested with certain faculties, and both the paths of gratitude and ingratitude have been kept open for him. He is therefore free to be grateful or ungrateful to God. He is granted a specific time on earth in order to test whether he emerges as a thankful or unthankful servant of his Lord.

Then, just in one sentence, it is categorically asked of those who will emerge as disbelievers from the test, what sort of outcome will they have to face in the Hereafter?

After this, verses 5–22 spell out, one after another, details of the bounties which will be conferred on the believers who have been thankful to their Lord. Not only is their reward mentioned in these verses, it is also clarified in brief which of their actions will entitle them to divine reward. One of the striking features of the early Makkan *Sūrahs* is that, along with briefly introducing the basic articles of Islamic faith and concepts, at some places it also highlights the moral values and virtuous deeds on which Islam places a premium. Moreover, at some other places, the vices which Islam wants man to shun have been identified. The consequences of these virtues and vices in this life are not discussed. Rather, the focus of attention is on their impact in the eternal and everlasting

life of the Hereafter, irrespective of whether a bad action is proven to be rewarding in this world or a good action is proven to be harmful.

Three important points are brought to the Prophet's attention in the next section of the *Sūrah*. The first one is that God has revealed the Qur'ān to him in brief instalments. The disbelievers are thus told that the Qur'ān is not the product of the Prophet's mind. Out of His infinite wisdom, God has decided to send down the Qur'ān in stages. The second message imparted to the Prophet (peace be upon him) is that he should continue discharging his duty, no matter how long it takes to enforce God's decree. He should carry out his mission with perseverance. Never should he yield to the pressure of the wicked and disbelieving people. The third point highlighted is that the Prophet (peace be upon him) should glorify God morning and evening, offer prayers, and worship Him during the long watches of the night. This will bless him with steadfastness in confronting the mischievous atrocities of the disbelievers.

Then, in one sentence, the true reason of the disbelievers' dereliction is exposed. They are guilty of having disregarded the Hereafter and are only after the enjoyments of this world. In the second sentence, they are reminded that it is God Who has created them; they are not there on their own. They owe their physical attributes and strength to Him rather than to themselves. He is able to do to them whatever He wishes. He may disfigure them or replace them with another community after destroying them. Equally powerful is He to create them again in any other form.

The concluding verses state that the Qur'ān stands out as an exhortation. Whoever wills may accept it and follow the path to his Lord. However, man's desire and willingness is not everything in this world; it will be of no avail until God Himself so wills. He decides things out of His knowledge and wisdom. He admits to His mercy whoever He pleases and He has prepared a grievous chastisement for those whom He finds among the wrongdoers and wicked.